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On the Right Note

Abstract

This is a cross-disciplinary comparison of violin playing and tutoring writing. As a violinist and a tutor, I have found that my mindset and way of tutoring is greatly influenced by my experience as a violinist. There are many valuable parallels from the violin world that can be used as tutors in how we approach students, how we critique their writing, and how we think about tutoring in general. I hope to pull out those similarities to provide some insights on how to improve giving feedback in a tutoring situation.

Keywords: Tutoring, Feedback, Violin, Performance

On the Right Note

A student sits next to me at the tutoring desk. Her paper riddled with parallelism issues and unclear topic sentences. She is eager to learn and excited to work with me. In my opinion, the best kind of student. However, as we dive into her paper, I notice her eyes change from excited to polite confusion. I backtrack and reword my explanation. She eventually understands the concept, but when it is time for her to leave, I am left insecure. Does she really understand? Does she know what to do next? Have I even helped her?

This experience led to an investigation on how to give students more effective feedback. This giving is at the heart of the writing center but leads to so many questions. What kind of feedback should I give? How do I know what the right kind of feedback is for each student? What if I can't help them? What if I make them cry? And so on.

As I reflected on how to give feedback, I thought of other situations involving one-on-one feedback in my life. I am a violinist, and I have been mentored in a lesson at least once a week for the last thirteen years of my life. As I made the comparison between violin and tutoring, I realized there are a lot of valuable parallels one can draw to ultimately help feedback to be confident, sensitive, and effective.

The first thing to remember is that writing, like playing the violin, is a performance. It is a presentation of a student's skill set. We need to remember this puts the student in a very vulnerable position. Performing in any context, whether musical or in writing, is intimidating. It's sharing something unique to you that has been unveiled by a creative process. Students are creative agents crafting something to give to the world. This is an important concept for tutors to remember and to help the student recognize. Giving students respect as a creator is crucial in

building their confidence. Acknowledging their performance allows us to not only validate their work but validate their person.

I remember a violin teacher who, no matter what my playing sounded like, would always tell me “thank you,” or “good.” Giving this positive affirmation after being in a vulnerable place was encouraging and helpful. Likewise, it is important to follow up a piece of writing with a positive statement, no matter how much of a mess the paper seems to be. I have had violin teachers simply say, “I liked this one note,” after I played poorly, but they always find something positive to say. Giving a student an affirmation to hang onto is extremely important. It builds the student’s confidence and helps ally yourself with the student. You need to make it clear that you want them to succeed.

And as a tutor, you also need to trust that you can help them succeed. It can feel absolutely overwhelming to address all of their concerns within one twenty-minute tutoring session. There can be a lot of pressure to be an all-knowing guru that fixes all of the student’s writing concerns in just a few short words of wisdom. But something that I’ve learned through playing the violin is that any feedback is good feedback.

For example, sometimes I would come to a violin lesson wanting to work on rhythm, and instead, my teacher would spend the entire time talking about how I was holding the instrument. This was a little perplexing as a student; it felt like the teacher chose to focus on the “wrong” problem. However, often in the course of practice, I would find that the correction my teacher made had solved some of my rhythmic problems as well. Issues are often interrelated, and even if they are not, by addressing any problem, the student then has more brain space to address their other issues. The point is that any feedback coming from a genuine place will be helpful for students. There is no need for a tutor to become paralyzed or overanalyze the kind of feedback

they give. Simply addressing concerns and focusing on what you see in the students' writing will be a great place to begin. Trust that your feedback is good enough.

In addition, a good violin teacher adapts their lesson to the student's needs. I have come into lessons underprepared or needing something vastly different than what my teacher had planned for. The most impactful lessons are those adapted to my needs as a student. We need this same kind of flexibility as tutors. Simply assessing a student's mood can have a significant impact on the kind of feedback we give. Is the student overwhelmed? Confident? Insecure? Bored? Excited? In order to give accessible feedback, we need to shape our feedback according to the student's response.

In teaching violin lessons, and working with other musicians, the kind of feedback I give varies drastically depending on who I am giving it to. My tone, how tactful I am, whether I make a joke, and even my body language will change from person to person. Every student is so individual. With a young student, I give lots of analogies and anecdotes to help abstract concepts make sense. With a peer musician, I approach things as more of a discussion. I ask more questions in order to understand their process before jumping in with my advice. Similarly, in tutoring, we need to be flexible with how we give feedback and relate it to the students we are working with. Are they a beginning writer, or are they a confident one? By shaping the feedback to their experience, skill level, and personality, it is able to be more useful.

My favorite feedback comes in the form of an action plan. In both violin lessons and tutoring sessions, many concepts are usually addressed. It can be hard to remember everything that was talked about, and this can be a bit overwhelming the next time you sit down at the computer, or head to the music stand in order to improve your craft. What good is having a lesson if you don't remember what was said? Taking notes is often something the violin teacher

and tutor will do. However, sometimes the notes are so detailed (or not detailed enough) that it can be ambiguous as to where to begin.

I like to make a summary of the session with the student as they are getting ready to leave. By giving a very specific and clear “action plan,” I have confidence that the student will actually apply what we talked about in the lesson. Specific and clear feedback is the most applicable. Grant Wiggins in his article “Seven Keys to Effective Feedback,” states “effective feedback requires that a person has a goal, takes action to achieve the goal, and receives goal-related information about his or her actions” (Wiggins). Wiggins also uses the words “user-friendly” and “actionable.” Basically, feedback needs to be something tangible that students can remember and apply on their own in the practice room or writing desk.

Insecurities as tutors can be addressed as we focus our attention on the student and their needs. As violin pedagogue Ivan Galamian says “Teaching according to rigid rules is teaching of the wrong kind. The teacher who takes his mission seriously will see in every single student an entirely new and challenging problem” (Galamian 105). As we focus on each student as a unique individual we have the opportunity to create and problem-solve alongside the students we work with. We can help students write and leave the writing center on the right note.

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